

[Ronald Brownstein:](#)

Washington Outlook

A Smarter Way to Control Outbreaks of School Gun Violence

It's still true, as Leo Tolstoy wrote long ago, that every unhappy family is unique in its misery. But in our time, the bridge between private despair and public tragedy, especially for young people, is often the same: stolen guns.

So it was in last week's school massacre in Red Lake, Minn. No one can definitively say what created Jeff Weise's desire to kill. It may have had its roots in a shattered family, or an adverse reaction to antidepressant drugs, or simply humanity's innate capacity for evil.

But there's less mystery about the factor that created his ability to kill 10 people, including himself: When Weise shot his grandfather, a police sergeant, with a .22-caliber handgun and stole his shotgun and revolver, the young man's rage became much more dangerous to those around him.

In that way, the 16-year-old was hardly unique. Experts say that young people who commit school shootings often use guns stolen from adults; it could hardly be otherwise.

That pattern has drawn almost no attention in the killings' aftermath. The White House, the political establishment and even the media have treated the Minnesota shooting spree — when they diverted their attention from Terri Schiavo long enough to notice it at all — as an inexplicable tragedy that underscored the persistence of school violence. But it ought to inspire us to ask what we can do to make such tragedies less frequent and, when they occur, less deadly.

The answer has many pieces, from improvements in school security to more effective counseling for troubled youths. But part of it could be no more complicated than making it tougher for young people to use guns that don't belong to them. In an era of personalized technology, it seems reasonable to ask why it isn't possible to design guns that can't be fired by anyone except their authorized user.

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That's the question being explored by researchers at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark. In 2002, the New Jersey Legislature passed a groundbreaking measure encouraging the development of so-called smart guns that would not fire for anyone except their authorized owner.

No such guns exist today. But the New Jersey statute said the state would permit the sale of only smart guns three years after any manufacturer brought to the market a viable model.

The New Jersey Institute of Technology has been working to develop such a firearm since 1999, the last few years with the help of federal funds secured by its two Democratic senators, Jon Corzine and Frank R. Lautenberg. The institute, part of the state university system, spent the first few years examining alternative approaches for personalizing a gun to prevent anyone but its owner from firing it.

For the last several years, the institute has focused on "dynamic grip recognition" technology. That's a system enabling sensors in a gun's handle to recognize the owner's grip and then block anyone else from firing it.

"The basic concept is this — the way you grab the gun during the first incidence of the trigger pull becomes a coordinated and reflexive act," said Donald H. Sebastian, the institute's vice president for research and technology. "The fingerprint equivalent is the pressure pattern of your hand on the grip of the gun over time. We can see enough uniqueness in roughly the first tenth of a second of the trigger pull in order to be able to identify you as you."

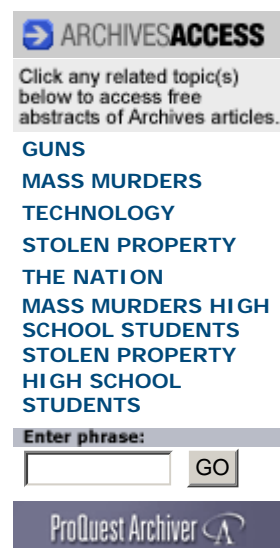
The research has progressed enough that the institute demonstrated a prototype at a shooting range in Bayonne, N.J., in December. But Sebastian estimates the effort is three years away from producing an actual gun that consumers will consider reliable enough to purchase.

The technical challenges are formidable.

Before it could be sold, the institute's smart gun would need to demonstrate that it could recognize its owner if he was wearing gloves, or grabbed the gun in an unusual way under stress, or even picked it up with the hand other than the one he normally uses. Since many people buy guns for personal protection, the margin for error is understandably low.

Yet Sebastian is confident, based on the research so far, that these technical problems can be overcome. And, indeed, smart guns fit with the steady

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development of technology personalizing products for their users.

"When the public becomes more familiar with personalization technology, such as computers, it will come to understand that the technology is feasible and ought to be applied to guns as well," said Stephen Teret, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

Washington could accelerate that process if it focused more on the potential. After the shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School in 1999, President Clinton negotiated an agreement with Smith & Wesson in which the venerable gun maker agreed to develop smart guns, as well as to take other positive steps, such as installing locks on all guns.

But the company was battered by a boycott organized by gun-owner groups, which considered the deal a sellout of gun rights. After a change of ownership, Smith & Wesson cooled on the agreement, and President Bush allowed the company to back out of it. Today, that once-promising effort is a dead letter.

One of a president's greatest tools is the power to enlarge — or diminish — the parameters of the possible. Bush said nothing in public about the Minnesota shootings for days, and when he finally mentioned it, in his radio address Saturday, he alluded only to the need for more character education.

That's a worthwhile initiative. But the country deserves a more comprehensive approach to discouraging youth violence. Part of the answer could be expanded federal efforts to support the work in New Jersey and to spur gun manufacturers to explore other possibilities to prevent young people from killing with guns that don't belong to them. That's not left or right. It's just smart.

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Ronald Brownstein's column appears every Monday. See current and past columns on The Times' website at <http://www.latimes.com/brownstein> .